

## One Humanity, One State: an interview with Mazin Qumsiyeh

By Liza Burr

On Sunday, December 20, 2015, the WAMM Middle East Committee sponsored a Skype session with Palestinian biologist and activist Mazin Qumsiyeh “live from Bethlehem” (actually the town of Beit Sahour, which is adjacent to Bethlehem). The session featured a talk by Qumsiyeh, after which he answered questions posed by the audience. In addition to teaching at two major Palestinian universities, Qumsiyeh directs a clinical cytogenetics laboratory, the Palestine Museum of Natural History, and the Institute for Biodiversity Research. A U.S. citizen, Qumsiyeh has also taught at Duke University and Yale University. Like others such as Israeli historian Ilan Pappé (see WAMM newsletter, Summer I 2015 [vol. 33, no. 3]), Qumsiyeh advocates the creation of one democratic state for all residents instead of the current exclusive, apartheid state in which Israelis and Palestinians are separated, with the former ruling over the latter.



*Mazin Qumsiyeh.*

*Photo: Carolin Smith*

Qumsiyeh analyzed the regional and international context of the Palestinian-Israeli situation as orchestrated by “an elite group of people who are promoting conflicts to benefit themselves” financially. For example, weapons exports from Britain to the Middle East are disproportionately high compared to exports to other areas of the world. Saudi Arabia spends money on weapons that could and should be used to alleviate the extreme hunger from which parts of its population suffer. Globally, governments want to distract us with “petty conflicts” while the global disparity between rich and poor accelerates. The West functions as the driving force behind this dynamic.(1) In 1916, Britain and France signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement to divide up the Middle East—which was then still part of the Ottoman Empire—into countries assigned to one of the two powers as “mandates.” In 1917, a statement by

then-French Foreign Minister Jules Cambon and the British Balfour Declaration committed France and England to the creation of a sectarian Jewish state in Palestine, where most of the population was Muslim, with a minority of Christians and a smaller minority of Jews. All of these measures were destined to produce “divisions and mayhem and discomfort” and conflict, in addition to masses of refugees, as we see now too. In 1947, U.S. President Truman’s advisors clearly foresaw the negative consequences of endorsing a Jewish state, but they were overruled by political considerations.

Speaking five days before December 25, 2015, Qumsiyeh described how Muslims and Christians in the Bethlehem area celebrate the birth of Jesus together (for Muslims, Jesus is a “venerated prophet”). But, he added, “We haven’t had a real Christmas here for many decades because...the Israeli occupation has made it impossible for Palestinians to have a normal Christmas” in the land where Jesus was born. The majority of Christian and Muslim Palestinians on the West Bank may not enter Jerusalem and therefore are prevented from worshiping at their holiest places (more on the Al-Aqsa Mosque here in this article).

While increasingly relegated to “smaller and smaller shrinking ghettos” (like reservations for American Indians), Palestinians in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) have also been increasingly “surrounded by walls and other barriers and checkpoints.” The 180,000 people of Bethlehem are confined to 13 percent of the Bethlehem district. Palestinian towns are “warehouses...to store unwanted people.” Given the oppressive conditions under which they live, the level of Palestinian active resistance is remarkably low compared to that of other peoples in analogous situations of colonial oppression. Nevertheless, there is a history of Palestinian uprisings since the Ottoman period. The wave of active resistance that began on October 1, 2015, is about the 15th such uprising and “hopefully the last” [if the goal of ending the Israeli occupation and with it the oppression of Palestinians is achieved]. By December 20, 128 Palestinians had been killed by the Israeli military; 25 of these were children, and six were women. 14,740 Palestinians were injured.(2)

Despite the steady stream of casualties, Qumsiyeh referred with pride to Palestinian “resilience on our land,” which has in reality defeated the “Zionist project” of establishing an exclusive Jewish state—originally envisioned to encompass all the territory “between the Nile and the Euphrates,” but subsequently reduced to include only “parts of Lebanon, the Golan Heights, parts of Jordan, parts of the Sinai, and parts of Saudi Arabia.” [The latter, “scaled back” project was depicted on a map presented by the World Zionist Organization to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.] Zionist leader David Ben Gurion’s complementary “plan of the 1920s” has been implemented ever since: pretend to seek peace by talking endlessly and deceptively about a “two-state solution,” which is Zionist-Israeli propaganda.(3) Contrary to this plan, the Zionist project (like that of the Crusaders and other exclusivist groups) has “failed miserably.” The only “win-win” option is a “state for all its people based on

human rights and justice”—coexistence instead of nonexistence, equality instead of apartheid.

Qumsiyeh concluded his talk by encouraging activism to counteract despair, using himself as an example: without his own professional work at Bethlehem and Birzeit Universities and his own political activism, “I would be in a mental institution.”

### Two Sources of the Current Uprising

The interactive session after Qumsiyeh’s talk began with a question about the Israeli government’s intentions regarding the Al Aqsa Mosque, located in occupied East Jerusalem’s Haram al-Sharif (“Noble Sanctuary,” otherwise known as the Temple Mount). Qumsiyeh reminded the audience that the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall compose a Muslim sanctuary, as has been recognized and observed for centuries. Under the Israeli occupation, however, that status is threatened with the possibility of Israel (illegally) dividing the Al Aqsa Mosque both “temporally and spatially” between Muslims and Jews, as it has done with the Ibrahimi Mosque in the Palestinian town of Hebron on the West Bank. The current Palestinian uprising was triggered by two incidents in late July of last year—extremist Jewish settlers entering the Al Aqsa Mosque [Israeli forces fired stun gun grenades and rubber-coated steel bullets at Muslim worshipers to clear the way for them], and the firebomb attack with Molotov cocktails perpetrated by Jewish settlers on the home of the Dawabshe family, resulting in the death of both parents and their infant child.



*Israeli troops enter the plaza where the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa mosques are located, July 2015.*

*Photo: Arab Press EU*

### The Specter of Religious War

Israel’s alleged designs on the Al Aqsa Mosque suggest a larger Israeli agenda of provoking a “religious war” with Muslims, according to Qumsiyeh, an agenda that is

being advanced by the Israel lobby, and could be linked to anti-Muslim rhetoric. This falls in line with former Harvard professor (now deceased) Samuel Huntington's "nonsense" about the "clash of civilizations."

Instead, Qumsiyeh maintains, "We're all one human civilization." However, clashing and conflicts serve the interests of the elites who profit from war. Israel pushed the U.S. to wage war on Iraq in 2003, which in Qumsiyeh's view is why that war happened; it was not about oil, as can be demonstrated. Neoconservative Zionists wanted regime change in Iraq in order to weaken the country in favor of Israeli regional hegemony. Likewise, "the struggle for Palestine is the struggle in Syria now." "Getting people to kill each other" is the intention of U.S. policy in the Middle East; it is "not about bringing peace and justice...or about advancing democracy." Witness U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Israel, which "are allowed to violate human rights on a daily basis"—both countries in violation of international law: Saudi Arabia against its own people and the people of Yemen, Israel against the Palestinians [and against Israeli human rights organizations].

Is the Palestinian Authority on the Verge of Collapse?

In answer to the question of whether the Palestinian Authority [the Palestinian self-governing body rooted in the Oslo Accords of 1993 and recognized by Israel; it is currently led by Mahmoud Abbas] will soon collapse, Qumsiyeh replied that, as long as the PA continues to serve as "subcontractors for the Israeli occupation," Israel and the U.S. will not allow it to collapse. The PA supposedly "represents the prisoners" while it fulfills "the wishes of the prison guards" (meaning the Israeli government). Yet he foresees that the current uprising led by Palestinian youth will "overcome and bypass...the anachronistic system that was created by Oslo." (4)

Only a single democratic state will promote "human rights and...reconciliation and justice"; there is no other way. You cannot make 78 percent of historic Palestine off-limits to Palestinian refugees (or their descendants) who were ethnically cleansed from their homes and have been granted the right of return under international law. You cannot divide "such a small piece of land...into two countries." Furthermore, there is no historical example anywhere in the world of a "colonial/anti-colonial struggle" concluding with a "two-state solution." Only three outcomes of such a struggle have ever occurred: (a) the natives are minimized and put on reservations, as in Australia and the U.S.; (b) the colonizers are thrown out by the natives, as in Algeria; or (c) a system of "coexistence and equality" is worked out, as in South Africa. The model to emulate is (c).

The Demolition of Palestinian Homes

In answer to a question about the Israeli demolition of Palestinian homes, Qumsiyeh named the British Zionist Herbert Samuel, appointed the first high commissioner of Palestine by Britain in 1920, as the first political figure to use house demolitions as a means of demoralizing and collectively punishing the Palestinians in response to "uprisings or...disturbances." Samuel magnified the policy of house demolitions to the level of removing whole Palestinian villages, which culminated in 1947-1949

with the Zionist-Israeli destruction and complete ethnic cleansing of “530 Palestinian villages and towns,” hence “tens of thousands of homes.” The policy of house demolitions has been practiced ever since by Israel “because it is a natural and intrinsic part of the colonial ideology.” Why? In order to confiscate their land, “you have to remove the native people from their property,” and this “has to be done with violence...using whatever excuse.”

#### The Colonization and Liberation of Minds

Regarding the Israeli campaign “to drive the Palestinians crazy,” Qumsiyeh quoted black South African anti-apartheid revolutionary Steve Biko, who identified “the best weapon in the hands of the oppressor” as “the minds of the oppressed.” Palestinian minds are colonized if they are brainwashed into hating Jews or, as a consequence of being tormented at checkpoints, into regarding themselves as living without hope, powerless, meaningless, subhuman, enslaved, and inferior to their Israeli overlords, who “have the intellect” and “have the weapons.” But if Palestinians resist this mental colonization and liberate their minds, they can change their situation and the situation of the colonizers.

In doing so, they follow the guidance of the Quran, which teaches the unity of humanity.(5)

Liza Burr is a member of the WAMM Middle East Committee. She earned a Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from Harvard University, and has taught at several universities in the Twin Cities, in addition to other activities. Her most recent course was “Justice, War, and Peace in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” offered at Metropolitan State University. She has visited Israel/Palestine periodically since 1970.

#### Endnotes

1. Not part of the talk, but in November of last year the U.S. State Department approved \$1.29 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Human rights groups objected to such U.S. weapons sales, as well as those of the UK, because they resulted in indiscriminate bombings, high civilian casualties, and destruction of infrastructure.
2. “List of Palestinians Killed between Oct. 1 and Dec. 18.” December 19, 2015. International Middle East Media Center. [imemc.org](http://imemc.org). The names and ages of the victims are listed, a substantial number of whom are teenagers.
3. Ben-Gurion formed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in 1948. Known as “Israel's founding father,” he became the first prime minister.
4. The Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 designated an official interim representation of the Palestinian people with Israel. The Oslo Process was supposed to produce a peace treaty between Israel and Palestine.
5. See, for example, Quran 49:13, which begins, “People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman...” Text as translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, in *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford University Press, 2004.